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Extended/distributed cognition and the native speaker

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ABSTRACT

Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, the 'native speaker' has proven to be both a liberating and an oppressive concept in applied linguistics. Over several decades Alan Davies challenged the concept on account of the barrier it poses for language learners, who can never achieve native speakerhood on account of factors of birth and upbringing that result in unacceptable discrimination and limited opportunities that are not tolerated in most aspects of citizenship or employment, but have managed to persist where language is concerned. Yet native and non-native speakerhood is a genuine part of our experience and perception, which it seems illusory to deny on account of its unpalatable political consequences. This article reconsiders the concept of native speaker in the light of current theories of extended and distributed cognition, which allow us to redefine it in corporeal and intrapersonal terms, rescuing its liberating aspects, which have not been negligible, while providing a sustainable basis for rejecting it in those contexts where it is oppressive.

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1. Native speaker: liberation and oppression

Nationalism has been the great curse of humanity.
In no other shape has the Demon of Ignorance
assumed more hideous proportions; to no other
obsession do we yield ourselves more readily.

Sir William Osler, Chauvinism in medicine (1902)

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!

Sir Walter Scott, The lay of the last minstrel (1805)

Every concept, model and technique devised by theoretical or applied linguists has its limits in terms of applicability and shelf life. It is futile to assess them simply as right or wrong; in the long run, to paraphrase Keynes, they are all dead wrong. What needs to be asked is: right or wrong *for what*? What does the concept, model or technique make it possible to do, and at what cost? Could an alternative one do it better, or at less cost?

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The concept of the native speaker has enabled a great deal over the course of its history, including the educational liberation of millions – only in certain contexts, but enough for the concept to be accepted for decades by linguists as liberal and progressive. This blinded them to how, in other contexts, it has held back millions of others, in the worst cases to the point that to call it oppressive is no exaggeration.

The native speaker appeared to be an egalitarian concept because it applied equally to everyone. Linguistics was committed to a descriptivism in which it was axiomatic that “the native speaker cannot err” (except by a slip of the tongue, an accident of processing that reveals no flaw in knowledge of the language). This creed united linguists bitterly opposed to one another over virtually every other aspect of linguistic analysis. The native speaker’s authority was as fundamental for sociolinguists as for generativists and applied linguists concerned with language teaching and assessment.

One of the concept’s shining moments came with the Black English trial (*Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District*) in Michigan in 1979, where the reason and passion of William Labov helped to persuade the court of the equal authority of every individual concerning the structure of his or her native dialect (see Labov, 1982). This was no small feat, given that initially it was unclear to the court that Black English has a regular structure, rather than just being a cover term for haphazard errors in Standard English. At stake was ensuring that speakers of non-standard English have the same educational rights already granted to second-language speakers by the US Supreme Court in the case of *Lau v. Nichols* (1974).

This liberating side of the native speaker concept depended on a wider acceptance that all individuals, given equal opportunities, would develop to their full potential. If some are inherently endowed with particular abilities and talents, this pertains to every nationality and race. The law has a duty to ensure that the same opportunity for development is provided for individuals of whatever origin and ability.

Here a paradox arises. Educational systems are bound up with languages. If the world were such that every place had one language, and everyone stayed in their birthplace their whole life, equal opportunity based on equality of native speakerhood might be viable on the linguistic level. But we inhabit a world in which people move about, and always have done so, whether by choice or force or through some economic draw that makes the choice unaccidental though not exactly forced. Even those who do not move will have others move in on them, welcomed or not. All this population dynamic has its linguistic effects – not that languages would fail to change even without the emigration and immigration. No new generation speaks exactly like the one before it, partly because children learn the language by inference, rather than having it transferred to them wholesale, and some of their inferences will be innovative; partly because innovation is at least as deeply rooted in human nature as continuity is, and in each new generation there are some, at least, who want to perform their dynamism, which indexes their fitness and uniqueness.

Not only do languages change internally, but language choice changes: population movements over centuries have led to a small number of languages carrying particular advantages in terms of economic edge and social and educational power. A native speaker of English is the equal of a native speaker of East Greenlandic in their linguistic authority for how to say something in their respective mother tongues, but not on the practical level of the opportunities open to each of them, outside of Eastern Greenland, or for that matter within it.

One might have expected all this historical movement to have led people generally to think of their languages as dissociated from the place they inhabit. But all that dynamism and enrichment brings with it a feeling of cultural uprootedness that is discomfiting. A sense of security is found in locating oneself in a place – not just geographical, but cultural, including linguistic – where one’s ancestors thrived, or at any rate survived. Security, and soul.

Scott could well have written “my native tongue” rather than “land” in *The lay of the last minstrel*, except that it was Scotland he was writing about, in English. Not Scots, not Gaelic, not Pictish, not Brythonic. The identity of Scotland’s “authentic” language was a matter of much dispute in his time, as now. For individuals, too, the identity of their native language may be unclear if they are brought up in a multilingual setting. But despite the tenuousness of the connection of language with place – or rather, because of it – the link can undergo cultural strengthening. Scott goes on to say that “If such there breathe, go, mark him well; /For him no Minstrel raptures swell,” and when this “wretch” dies, the “dust, from whence he sprung” will receive him “Unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.” Minstrels sing only of the native sons whose souls are inseparable from their nativeness. The song is how nativeness is constructed, and maintained. It is powerful stuff, and a double-edged sword, as Osler recognized in the first epigram above.

In schools and universities, the study of languages, native or foreign, was traditionally text-based, grounded in grammars, scripture and literature, including the minstrel’s lay. Indeed, for nineteenth and early twentieth-century academics, literature meant poetry first and foremost. It was in poetry that the genius of the language and the soul of the race manifested themselves most directly. Novels, in contrast, were classed as entertainment, as was theatre unless written in poetic form. Introductory foreign-language courses aimed to prepare students for literary study, knowledge of which would ultimately form the basis for assessing their achievement-*cum*-proficiency.

The reorientation of language teaching and testing toward the native speaker brought a liberation to those considerable numbers of students whose interest lay in learning the language, rather than mastering its literature. This was a long and difficult struggle, particularly in universities, where those who occupied the senior ranks of language departments had themselves thrived under the literature-based system and based their careers and status upon it. So long as students were required to take a classical or modern foreign language, the old system could endure. But decade after decade, in the English-speaking world, such requirements were weakened or dropped, and by the 1980s were becoming the exception rather than the rule. Now academic language teaching had to adjust to what students wanted from it: a decoupling of

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